

To Lithuania: Stay Put

By Robert Schaeffer

The Lithuanian Communist Party, by breaking with Moscow, has raised the expectations of secessionist movements in Lithuania, the other Baltic republics and among each of the 104 ethnic nationalities in 12 other republics, 20 autonomous republics and 18 national districts that comprise the Soviet Union.

But while Lithuanians want to exercise their self-determination and secede from the union, a right guaranteed by the Constitution, the secession of Lithuania — or any other Soviet republic — would ultimately lead away from democracy, not toward it.

Separatism threatens to undermine potential democracy in the Soviet Union just as the Civil War imperiled democracy in the United States. Lincoln criticized secessionism, saying that if a minority can secede from the Union, "They make a precedent which in turn will divide and ruin them; for a minority of their own will secede whenever a majority refuses to be controlled by such minority."

No doubt the Lithuanians can make a strong case for independence. Although it had been part of Russia from 1795 to 1918, Lithuania was independent between the world wars before being annexed illegally in 1939.

But its case is not unique. Ethnic groups throughout the Soviet Union have deserving claims. Once secessionist principles are admitted, there is no reason why independence should

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Secession would hurt democracy.

not be extended to all.

In the short run, secession seems a good way to exercise political power and resolve ethnic conflict. But the partition of other countries has caused serious, ongoing problems.

After World Wars I and II, Ireland, Korea, China, Vietnam, India, Pakistan, Palestine, Germany and Cyprus were divided so that separate ethnic or ideological groups could exercise self-determination. These partitions caused enormous social dislocations and impoverished the meaning of citizenship and sovereignty.

The partitions displaced millions of people living on the "wrong" side of newly created borders, yet many minorities remained behind, mocking attempts to create ethnically homogeneous nations. Upon taking power, majority groups have typically disfranchised minorities, denigrated nonofficial languages and undermined minorities' civil rights. Such discrimination, of course, exacerbated social conflict.

Partitions left the territorial status of many countries unresolved, which helped set the stage for conflict over disputed territories. The major wars since World War II — in Korea and Vietnam, between India and Pakistan and Israel and its neighbors — have been partly a consequence of partition-induced problems.

Similar problems would likely attend the secession of Lithuania or other Soviet republics. There are sizable minorities in Lithuania and Estonia, while Latvians are actually in the minority in their own country. What would become of other ethnic groups in independent states? We might well expect disruptive migrations, which would neither create homogenous states nor resolve conflicts between majorities and minorities.

While Baltic secessionists have sought independence peacefully, their attitudes toward minorities can be gauged by laws already enacted (and sometimes rescinded). The laws have limited the voting rights of minorities, restricted immigration and required government officials to use indigenous languages or lose their jobs. Legislation of this sort degrades the meaning of citizenship and sets the stage for inter-ethnic conflict.

To his credit, Mikhail Gorbachev has attempted to democratize the political process and to devolve considerable power from the center to the republics.

Whether this will assuage independence-minded ethnic groups is unclear. But Mr. Gorbachev clearly understands that secessionism for some is incompatible with democracy for all: "To exercise self-determination through secession is to blow apart the union, to pit people against one another and sow discord, bloodshed and death," he has said.

Baltic ethnic groups believe secessionist politics will help them achieve democracy. But in the long run the pursuit of self-determination is likely to come at the expense of democracy and lead them into a sectarian cul-de-sac from which it will be difficult to escape. □

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